

From a Cub Reporter's Note Book

By HAMILTON PELTZ.

INTERVIEWS? When one well nigh has rounded out four decades of newspaper hustling at home and abroad it would be strange if he had not met through the medium of the interview many celebrities, some statesmen, a host of near statesmen and not a few charlatans, demagogues and crooks.

The qualities that used to make for successful interviewing? They are not unlike those essential to good salesmanship. Assurance, address, patience, personality, resourcefulness—these, plus such a faculty of memory, of perspective and of accuracy as may enable the interviewer justly to sift the wheat from the chaff without invoking "a correction" and without pulling a pencil during the interviewing process. The latter slavish expedient often is disconcerting to the interviewee and not infrequently has wrecked a promising prospect.

The writer's first outstanding triumph, however, owed its success less to such desirable attributes than to two quite extraneous factors not necessarily correlated. The star reporter chanced to choose for one of his periodic alcoholic lapses the hour best fitted to advance the fledgling fortunes of the cub reporter. And, secondly, the cub reporter had been singularly fortuitous in the choice of his paternal grandfather.

"Pigiron" Kelley in the early eighties was the pet of Pennsylvania Republicanism. For years he had been the "Father of the House"—the Uncle Joe Cannon of an earlier era. To be sure he had been christened William and he had graced the bench; so he was Judge Kelley on occasions of ceremony. But Pennsylvania Republicans over whom he held away less potent only than that of Senator Matt Quay loved to call him "Pigiron" Kelley. He was ever forcing the fight for the nurturing through a high protective tariff of those infant industries the fruitage of which has yielded to the great Keystone State its Andrew Carnegie, its Charles M. Schwab and a bumper crop of other multi-millionaires.

"Pigiron" Kelley was wont to visit Europe during the recesses of Congress. He used to return to his worshipful Philadelphia constituency bristling with fresh ammunition—hot shot wherewith from his

vantage point of House leader to bombard the batteries of the misguided anti-protection minorities during the coming session. The woes of European cheap labor, children in the mills eking out a paltry pittance, women in Belgium forging chains at starvation wages—these were the horrible examples he delighted to depict in eloquent contrast to the lure of the Republican "full dinner pail."

Few local assignments were more vital to a Philadelphia daily journal than to interview Judge Kelley on the homecoming from his annual pilgrimage. Here was a job for the star reporter. The old Philadelphia Times—the Times of the venerable Alexander K. McClure, confidant of Lincoln—had a star reporter. Also it had a star city editor, the late Julius Chambers, a one time managing editor of THE NEW YORK HERALD, pioneer chief of its European edition, and for many years a pet lieutenant of the younger Bennett.

Mr. Chambers had done his part. He had given an "overnight assignment," but, alas, his star reporter kept a prior date with old John Barleycorn! The weakness was one more common to mid-Victorian star reporters than now. And it was more complacently condoned. If a star conducted soberly and efficiently in those days four-sevenths of his time, his batting average was esteemed not bad.

Chambers was a nervous and emotional as well as an efficient executive. Picture, then, the city editor's brainstorm when, after dark of the evening of October 24, 1883, the star reporter flashed meteorlike into the old sanctum at Eighth and Chestnut streets, catapulted his umbrella at an office boy, consigned all newspaper assignments to the fires of perdition and later curled up in his chair and slept. The star was lit up like a comet.

Judge Kelley had been ashore and in his West Philadelphia home for hours. Reporters for rival morning papers already had hailed him and garnered their precious sheaves. Chambers discharged a few high explosives. His nervous fingers combed through his rumpling hair. He swept keen eyes about the city room and beheld that the cub, a neophyte barely out of college, was the sole reporter available.

There were hurried orders, more impatient expletives (not at all flattering either to star or cub) and a final injunction:

"Call a cab—and hurry!"

When a cub was instructed to "call a cab" in those days—in Philadelphia—even a rookie knew the case was exigent.

Half an hour later a lathered cab horse drooped before an old fashioned home at Fortieth and Chestnut streets. With heart aflutter the rookie, in the throes of his first major engagement, slipped his card to the butler. A moment later "Pigiron" Kelley, a sturdy veteran, confronted me on his threshold—a tanned face, strongly lined but kindly and framed in a grizzled iron gray beard. Under bushy brows, sharp eyes undimmed by age were studying the name on my card. Then the great man's glance shifted to his caller. His scrutiny appraised the cub from head to heels most disconcertingly.

"Is this your name, young man?"

"Yes, sir," timidly, almost deprecatingly.

"And are you by any chance a scion of my old chum, Alexander M., leader for his party in the Harrisburg State Senate in the days of my youth?"

"My grandfather, Judge" (less apologetically and with vaunting confidence).

"Why, damme, boy, I was a fool to ask it! You're the living double of Alec as I first knew and loved him."

"Pigiron" Kelley's arm was coddling my shoulder now. He was gently urging me toward the best armchair in his drawing room. "Nothing too good in Bill Kelley's house for a lad who bears that name," he declared, peering into his caller's face under the brighter light of his reading lamp. The timid intruder had become a welcome guest. To an old man he had brought back fond memories of the dear, dead days of long ago.

Well, Judge Kelley and his guest chatted chummily for an hour and more. Twice the happy host summoned his butler to fetch a fresh bottle of White Seal. The Judge mellowed sweetly under its warming influence. The cub sipped sparingly, fearing to impair his undisciplined faculties. The high protection champion fain would squander those precious moments. He would revel in the past, indulging reminiscence of a grandsire whose memory I honored but who had died in the harness at thirty, in my own father's infancy. The cub was keen to get down to the vital, flitting present.

At last the interviewer won. The Judge tapped his reservoir of recent experiences and there welled forth, bubbling, effervescent with humor, a bounteous, sparkling font of ideal newspaper "stuff."

A covert glance at the mantel clock warned me. It was 10:30. I had not dared pull a pencil lest it congeal the Judge's splendid flow of narrative. But the novice was taxing memory to register every spoken fact and fancy, though coupled with Old World names and places strange often to the ear of untraveled youth.

"Good night" came all too soon, but not without his urge to future hospitalities, not without final pledge to Auld Lang Syne. This last was my stirrup cup, so to speak.

A weary cabby and his dozing cob prodded into action, a Jehu like gallop across the Schuylkill and down Chestnut street and I dashed up stairs to a now humming city room.

Mr. Chambers was watching the clock, pacing the floor. With a visible effort at restraint he spoke, not unkindly but in a snappy staccato:

"Well, my boy, did he see you?"

"Yes, sir."

"And do you think you can write enough to cover us?"

"Yes, sir; detail an office boy to stand by and I'll unload it page by page."

Mr. Chambers smiled wanly. But his rawest recruit already was pushing a flying pencil—this was before the day of the now universal typewriting machine.

The city editor, ever discreet, rounded up my first folios of copy, appraising them almost at a glance. Then I heard his mollified voice over my shoulder:

"How much of that kind of stuff can you do before 12:30, my boy?"

"A column or more, sir, I think."

"Bully! Go to it!"

Continued on Following Page.

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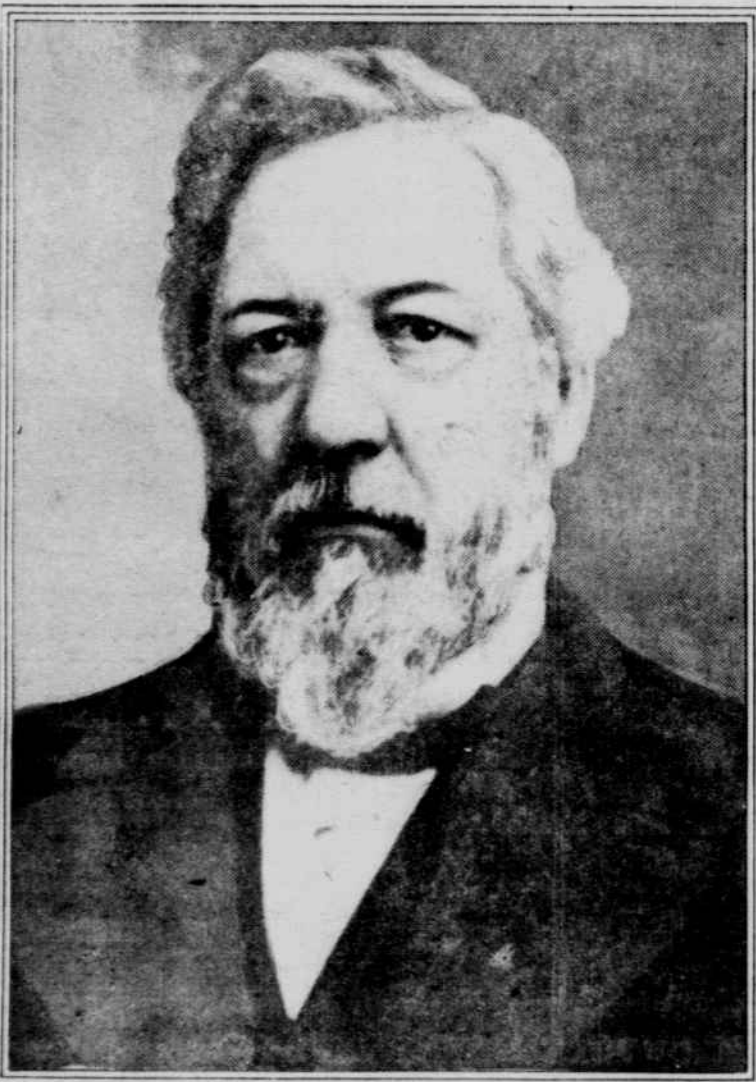
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